

Laura Dá. *Instruments of the True Measure*. Sun Tracks Series 83, University of Arizona Press, 2018. 75 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8165-3827-0.

<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/instruments-of-the-true-measure>

Laura Dá's new poetry collection, *Instruments of the True Measure*, is, in many ways, a continuance—but not a repetition—of her debut collection, *Tributaries*. In *Instruments of the True Measure*, Dá brings in a new cast of characters and her command of poetry craft has sharpened, which is quite a feat considering that her first collection, a National Book Award winner, read like a collection by a seasoned poet.

Like *Tributaries*, *Instruments of the True Measure* is an exploration of the poet's Shawnee ancestors and the many ways that cultural trauma engraves itself on past, present, and future generations. However, in *Instruments*, Dá considers both the stories of her native and non-native ancestors: the story of her non-native ancestors follows Crescent, beginning with his birth in the third poem in the book. From the story of his birth in the fourth poem of the book, Lazarus Shale from *Tributaries* returns as the embodiment of her Shawnee ancestors. Both Crescent's and Lazarus's birth poems are prefaced by "Nationhood," a prose poem / preface, and "The Point of Beginnings," a lyric. "Nationhood" and "The Point of Beginnings" both turn on the change in a baby's heart, post-birth, when it goes from "parallel flow to serial flow and the shunt between the right and left atrium closes" (3). Throughout the book, this corporeal change serves as a theme without being overtly referenced—what causes "changes of heart"?

"Nationhood," and "The Point of Beginnings," also introduce a pair of architectonic metaphors: surveying and mapping. Moreover, the surveying/mapping in the first two poems combined with the birth poems that follow prepares the reader to expect those terms as a constellation of metaphors—that is, that one (birth) and the other (surveying/mapping) are intertwined in the poet's perspective. The word "nascent" appears in "Nationhood": "North America is mistakenly called nascent. The Shawnee nation is mistakenly called moribund," (3). The association of birth and surveying/mapping is confirmed and displayed on the page, first in "Nationhood" and then throughout the book by the use of GPS coordinates where place names might be expected—including in birth poems of Lazarus and Crescent. The poet avows that, in the colonizer's mindset, the supposed births and deaths of nations are predicated upon survey lines, maps, and borders and that personhood, citizenship, and the landscape are confined within them.

Trauma is a major theme in this collection: bodily trauma, personal trauma, spiritual trauma, and the trauma of removal. In "Correction Lines," a poem I read as about Crescent, given the repetition of an image from an earlier poem when, as a boy, he sucked on "horses' cracked oats for the hint of molasses," ("Territorial Thirst" 45), the closing couplets' piercing imagery reveals the damage:

Inside the man, survey the boy
with horse oats in his mouth,

shadow of the branch blooming
in blood across his shoulders. (25)

Likewise, Lazarus's Shawnee removal trauma is so deep in his body that it has disturbed his gait and his mind:

Bone plate growth
jarred by endless movement—
his walk has changed
weeded by the terrain of new paths
so too his mind's rough
rooted channels.

In *Instruments of the True Measure*, trauma is the dark thread weaving through memory and time, leaving indelible traces on culture, mind, and body, and, as researchers have finally confirmed, upon our genetic code. Dá's ancestors' traumas appear in the body of the poet: "I map myself into frozen joints, weak, blood, and lacy bones; these measurements slip into a web over my frontiers" ("Mapsick" 11). In "Stick," the speaker figures her surgical scars in terms of the blazes surveyors carve into trees: "seven marks are carved into my torso and abdomen. I meander into the territory of illness and must learn to make its land my own; my body's sovereignty evaporates" (74). And, in "Pain Scale Treaties," she describes her efforts to express her physical pain to nurses in the manner they require as "a treaty with myself bartering the refinement of my language for rapidly delivered slivers of chemical mercy" (59). Treaties and removal were dependent on surveys and mappings of land—the lands that tribes were forced to cede and the lands they were removed to—the scars and the pain remain.

Laura Dá's complex architecture of metaphor and imagery is presented in spare, sparse language—there are absolutely no wasted words. Yet, inside the sparseness arises figurative language of an often gasp-inciting quality: "chilled holler of the axe's / subtle swipe," (32); "the coarse amber cradle / of Missouri whiskey," (61); hands that "grow hooked / around split-rail fences, / flatten and spatulate / over quill curve" (49). Every detail feels exactly right, from the "ten soft thuds" of a father's disapproving last words to his son (13) to the "rat-tooth embossed / leather strap" (33), to the way the hooves of a deer's carcass "tick across the tip / of the saddle horn" (43).

The sensately rich, verisimilar world that Dá creates in *Instruments of the True Measure* stays with the reader long after the book is closed, as it did for *Tributaries*. Although it may seem odd for a poetry review, I think of *Instruments* as a sequel to *Tributaries*. In fact, I realized that I had been longing to return to the world of *Tributaries*, to meet with Lazarus again, to be again astonished and challenged and informed and devastated by the poetry of Laura Dá.

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